"MY MOTHERLAND" SERIES NO. 42

EMPEROR HARSHA



THE SUNDAY TIMES OFFICE,

G. T., MADRAS.

 : : [*Price* **1** *Anna.*

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EMPEROR HARSHA



The story of Harsha forms one of the most romantic episodes in Indian history. And fortunately, as it approaches his glorious reign, Indian history becomes clearer and more replete with reliable historical records. The famous *Harsha Charita* by his court poet, the celebrated Bana, together with the vivid accounts of Hiueng-Tsang, the devout pilgrim from China, provide ample historical data to form a correct idea of his life and times.

Harsha, who ascended the throne in 606, was the second son of Prabhakara-Vardhana, ruler of a small Rajput kingdom around the hallowed ground of Kurukshetra, famed for its many battles. Thaneswar was its capital and Prabhakara-Vardhana had taken an honourable part in the united effort of the Indian princes to ward off the Hunnish invasions which were renewed year after year.

It was in the year 604, when Harsha and Rajya-Vardhana, his elder brother, were out on another expedition against the Huns that news of their father's serious illness reached the young warriors. Leaving his elder brother to complete the route, Harsha hastened home, only to find his beloved father dead and his mother immolating herself on the funeral pyre. Though plunged in sorrow, he carried on the administration till the victorious return of Rajya-Vardhana, who was then crowned king.

But a worse blow awaited the young princes. The Raja of Kanauj had married their beloved and beautiful sister,

Rajasri, and news now came that he had been slain in battle by the Raja of Malva and their sister thrown in dungeon, fettered like a common felon.

Burning with rage, Rajya Vardhana immediately marched at the head of his army to avenge his brother-in-law's death and rescue his sister, leaving Harsha in military command at the capital. He defeated the Raja of Malva who sued for peace, and the gallant prince generously responded. But treachery played a part, and the youthful Rajya-Vardhana was lured to a lone spot and assassinated. Rajasri, however, escaped from the dungeon and fled into the fastnesses of the Vindhya mountains.

To Unite India

When news of the calamity reached Thaneswar, the whole of the State went into mourning. But the wise ministers summoned a State Council, installed Harsha on the throne and advised an immediate military campaign against the treacherous Malva and his allies. Harsha acted on this advice, but his first mission was to find his sister. Guided by friendly clans of aborigines, he succeeded in spotting the forest hermitage in the wilderness where Rajasri had sought shelter. And Harsha came none too soon. Unable to bear calamity after calamity, the tender princess had decided to commit *sati* and it was just when Rajasri and her maids were about to leap into the sacrificial fire that Harsha arrived to drag his beloved sister away from the devouring flames. The scene of re-union was touching. The sorrows the two had suffered were too much for their tender souls. Devout Buddhists both, the two decided on a complete renunciation of the world. But the Buddhist saint of the hermitage reminded them of their *dharma* and the duties they owed to their State and their subjects and persuaded them to return to the capital.

The first of his tasks thus completed, Harsha set out on his next mission. "Though a devout Buddhist," says Professor Havell, "that fact did not make him forget the tradition of kingship, which, from the days of Chandragupta Maurya, had made it every Kshatriya's desire to unite India into one great Aryan Empire, or under one umbrella. It can hardly be doubted that this desire, implicit in the *dharma* of a king whatever his religious beliefs might be, was prompted by considerations of wise statesmanship and patriotic feeling and not merely by the lust of conquest."

At the head of an imposing military force, consisting of 5,000 elephants, 20,000 cavalry, and 50,000 infantry, he set out to punish the wicked kings who had murdered his brother, and to bring the "five Indies" under one umbrella. The campaign lasted six years, and Harsha was everywhere crowned with success. The whole of Northern India was soon under his banner, and his rule was supreme in Aryavarta from sea to sea, as far south as the Narbada river, and extending in the north to the Punjab. Only in the south he suffered a set-back. Pulikesin II, the redoubtable Chalukyan king proved an equal match and after a fierce battle in 620, Harsha had to give up all hopes of the conquest of the Dekkan.

Unbroken Peace

After that, Harsha's reign was a period of unbroken peace. The capital of his vast empire was shifted from Thaneswar to Kanauj where he reigned in glory. Princess Rajasri shared the Imperial throne with him, which by itself proves, beyond doubt, that in ancient India the highest offices of State were open to women. Soon the Court of Kanauj became famous throughout Aryavarta for its liberal patronage of art and learning. Philosophers of every school

and poets and painters of renown flocked to the Imperial Court and were richly rewarded without distinction of caste, creed or country.

Warrior and Poet

Harsha was every inch a king. A chivalrous and brave warrior, he had a fine personality and was an expert connoiseur of art and literature. Himself a great poet, he lavished his gifts on men of learning. Sanskrit drama received the greatest patronage during his reign. The Emperor himself composed first-rate poems, and set them to music, which became popular throughout the land. Bana, his court poet, was his close friend and adviser and three of the finest dramatic works in Sanskrit, *Nagananda, Ratnavali* and *Priyadarsika* are attributed to him. And though a devout Buddhist, the Emperor had not the least sectarian bias, and delighted in the immemorial Aryan delectation of listening to philosophic debates of the learned leaders of various schools of thought.

And for the vivid and impartial accounts of the court of Harsha-Vardhana and the condition of India in the seventh century, posterity is indebted to Hieung-Tsang, the adventurous pilgrim from China who in 629 started to the land of the Enlightened One, to seek authentic records of Buddhist sacred texts.

Kind, Simple And Frugal

The Chinese pilgrim was only twenty-nine when he set out on his sacred mission, but already he was well-versed in all the intricate doctrines of the Mahayanist school of Buddhism. He travelled overland from China, stayed at the famous University of Nalanda, at Benares and at other noted seats of learning, studying and copying the sacred texts and was invited and honoured by the Emperor.

Hieung-Tsang speaks very highly of the character of the people. They were fond of learning, he says, well instructed and kindly disposed towards strangers. They believed in the working of Karma, and paid respect to moral and intellectual eminence. And speaking without sectarian bias, he testifies that even the non-Buddhist were honest and sincere. They "applied themselves to learning and were fond of religious merit though they sought the joys of this life." Of Brahmans and Kshatriyas, he says that they were clean-handed and unostentatious, pure and simple in life and very frugal. "The former kept their principles and lived, continently, strictly observing ceremonial purity: the latter were the race of kings and had held sovereignty for many generations and their aims were benevolence and mercy."

Educational System

The pilgrim found the country peaceful and safe for travelling except in some of the outer-lying districts of the Empire. There were good roads and rest-houses for travellers. But what impressed the visitor most was the organized system of popular education.

Children began by learning the alphabet and the *Siddham* or *Siddhi-asta*, a primer containing twelve chapters. At seven years they passed on to the study of the five 'sastras', or sciences beginning with the grammar. The second *Sastra* was the science of arts and crafts, the third medical science, the fourth logic and the fifth the principles of philosophy. All these departments of knowledge formed a system of general education for laymen of all sects. "In theory, at least," remarks an English historian, "Indian educationists of the seventh century A. D. are seen to have devised a system of public instruction far superior to that of the present day."

And the earnestness of the teachers, Brahman and Buddhist, receive the unstinted admiration of the Chinese traveller. The method of instruction was of course oral for the most part, but the diligence and the patience of the teachers, who first began by explaining the general meaning of the lesson, and then carefully analysed every detail point by point, surprised him. "They instructed the inert and sharpened the dull," he says, "and they took pains even with the idle shirkers, doggedly repeating instructions till their disciples were completely qualified."

Voluntary Teachers

And this admirable system was further augmented by the services of the wandering bands of *Bikhus* or Sadhus, who, born of wealthy families, had renounced the world for the service of the poor.

"There are men, who, far seen in antique lore and fond of the refinements of learning are content in seclusion, leading lives of continence. These come and go outside of the world, and promenade through life away from human affairs. Though they are not moved by honour or reproach, their fame is far spread.

"Though their family be in affluent circumstances, such men make up their minds to be like vagrants and get their food by begging as they go about. With them there is honour in knowing truth and there is no disgrace in being destitute.

"The rulers, treating them with ceremony and respect, cannot make them come to court. Now as the State holds men of learning and genius in esteem and the people respect them who have high intelligence, the honours and praises of such men are abundant, and the attentions, private and official, paid to them are very considerable. Hence men can force themselves to a thorough acquisition of knowledge."

One of the best proofs of the moral progress of India, as Professor Radhakumud Mukerjee points out, was this growth of asceticism, and the way in which it was esteemed and encouraged both by the rulers and the people at large. India could show men in abundance, men who renounced riches, the comforts of home, the many pleasures of social life, and even the love of fame, "that last infirmity of noble minds," as so many impediments to the quest of Truth. And the moral sense of a society was strong and sound that showed all honour to those who beggared themselves for the uplift of society. For, the ascetics were not against social service; they left the world to give the law unto the world. Attaining Truth, they were anxious to impart it to their fellows.

The Great Universities

"Thus", points out the professor, "in these travelling bands of ascetic teachers ancient India found one of the best agencies of public instruction, without any expense to the State, which could not have tackled the problem in such an efficient manner departmentally."

And it was at this time too, that the famous Universities of India shone at their highest glory, their fame and renown having spread to distant corners of the world, attracting students from Japan, China and Mongolia. From mere monasteries for the Buddhist monks, they grew into real seats of learning, admitting students of various sects within their portals. The Chinese pilgrim himself visited many of these Universities.

Every one of them was famous for one science or another. Takshasila, for instance, was famous for its school of medicine, while Ujjain was noted for its splendid school of astronomy. But the most famous was that of Nalanda, "the Oxford of Mahayana Buddhism and the rival of Benares, which was the stronghold of orthodox Brahminical learning."

Nalanda had the additional distinction of having been the holy ground, on which the Buddha himself had preached a thousand years before. Originally a mango orchard, it was freely offered to the Enlightened One, by five hundred

merchants who had purchased it from a rich aristocrat. And the lavish gifts of successive monarchs from far and wide had endowed it on a solid foundation.

And as the lone wanderer from China approached the far-famed seat of learning, he felt an awe and an admiration which found vent in a poetical description of its imposing grandeur.

Nalanda's Glory

In flowery language he describes the high towers piercing the mists of the morning, from the windows of which, one could watch the glowing sunset and meditate on the serene beauty of the moonlight. The numerous pillared halls and pavilions were richly carved and painted, filled with precious shrines, and glowing with colour and brilliant jewelled adornment. In the gardens the thick-leaved mango trees afforded a grateful shade, while the *kanaka* trees, with their festoons of brilliant red flowers, the fountains and serpentine canals of clear water filled with blue lotuses were more beautiful than anything he had seen anywhere. The monasteries of India, he says, could be counted in thousands, but none equalled Nalanda in the grandeur, richness, and loftiness of its construction.

Enclosed in an imposing wall, the spacious garden University had on its rolls 10,000 students, many of them hailing from beyond the borders of India. The main building where the ten-thousand were accommodated was six storeyed —the gift of six kings. Tuition as well as boarding was free and the University provided free lodging, medicine and clothes. The revenues of a hundred villages had been set apart for it by the State, to avoid any financial worry.

When Hieung-Tsang set his foot on India, Nalanda was in the seventh century of its existence. But the discipline was so splendid, and selection so discriminating that in the seven hundred years of existence, there had not been a single record of any infringement of the rules.

At Nalanda "the days were all too short for study and discussion; day and night they admonished each other, juniors and seniors, mutually helping to perfection."

Nor was the University exclusively Buddhist. It specialised in the Mahayana school of thought, but the eighteen other sects were also represented. And the catholicity of the great seat of learning is proved by the fact that the study of the sacred texts of Brahminical learning such as the Vedas and Sankhya, Nyaya and the Yoga Sastras occupied an honourable place in its curriculum. The Chinese pilgrim himself studied Yoga Sastras under Chancellor Silbhadra, "the highest living authority on the subject."

The Forest University

Thus was Nalanda an ideal and genuine University, "in the *universal* range of its studies and not a mere sectarian, denominational school."

Another famous institution also deserves mention here. "Comparable to Nalanda, in its freedom, its academic life and the variety and catholicity of its studies", says Professor Mukerji, "there was another seat of learning, the hermitage of the sage Divakaramitra, described by Bana. To that solitary and sylvan retreat in the depths of the Vindhyan forests was attracted all the varied learning and culture of the age. Students differing widely and radically in doctrines and practices, followers of all possible sects and schools of thought, gathered together in a common fellowship in the quest of Truth, the supreme object of a University.

"They were all busy—pondering, urging objections, raising doubts, resolving them, giving etymologies, disputing, studying and explaining. Truth was, indeed sought to be seen here from every conceivable view-point! There were the different sects of Jains, different classes of Brahminical ascetics, atheists like the Lothayatakas, philosophers like *Kapilas* and the *Vedantins*, the experts in law, linguistics and puranas, as well as experts in rituals and the material sciences."

After a study lasting five years at Nalanda, the Chinese scholar moved on to Kamarupa (Assam) on the invitation of the king of the country, who welcomed him with royal honours. And soon the fame of the great Master of the Law

having reached the ears of the devout Emperor, messengers came post-haste to invite him to grace the court of Kanouj.

A right royal welcome was accorded to Hieung-Tsang, who in turn was very much impressed with the greatness of the Poet Emperor. From his descriptions we learn that Harsha was as ardent in the administration of the Empire in peace as he was in his military campaigns. He was an indefatigable worker, constantly travelling over his far-flung empire, enquiring into every little detail and dispute and thus setting up an example to his ministers and the vassal kings. Like Asoka before him, Harsha, too, forbade the slaughter of animals for food, built roads, rest-houses and stupas and endowed monasteries and other benevolent institutions. Though Buddhism was the State religion, the State grants and gifts were distributed with an even hand.

No Benevolent Despot

The administration was an enlightened one. Though some of the provisions of the penal code were severe, the Chinese traveller found that the government was conducted on benign principles.

"It did not make any large demands either upon the liberties or on the pockets of people. Families are not registered and individuals are not subjected to forced labour or contributions. Taxation being light and forced service being sparingly used, every one keeps to his hereditary occupation and keeps to his patrimony."

Taxation was limited, according to immemorial tradition, to one-sixth of the produce of the land. And the Central Government, following the basic principle of Aryan constitution, left the people to govern themselves as far as possible, asserting its authority only in the case of national calamities such as famine and foreign invasions.

The king, too, was strictly bound by the constitution and was no benevolent despot as is commonly supposed. There are authentic records to show, as in Harsha's own case, that the Council of Ministers wielded real power even in the election of a king to the vacant throne.

A census of the districts was regularly taken and it is interesting to note that a separate Department of Records and Archives was specially maintained. "Both good and bad were faithfully recorded in the official annal and State papers and instance of public calamity and good fortune are set forth in detail."

The Golden Ages

In the flowery words of his court-poet, "beneath his rule the golden age seemed to bud forth in close-packed lines of sacrificial posts, the evil time to flee in the smoke of the sacrifices meandering over the sky, heaven to descend in stuccoed shrines, Dharma to blossom in white pennons waving over temple minarets, the villages to bring forth a progeny of beautiful harbours erected on their outskirts for meetings, alms-houses, inns and women's marquees."

It was in the beginning of 644 that Hieung-Tsang emerged out of his studies at Nalanda and arrived at the court of Harsha. Both Harsha and Princess Rajasri were Buddhists of the Hinayanist school, but the Chinese Master soon convinced them of the greater merits of the Mahayanist school. Immediately afterwards, Harsha summoned a great religious assembly at Kanouj to which all the great religious teachers of the land were invited, to argue with the Master of the Law from the distant East. The Emperor's proclamation was warmly responded to. Four thousand monks of the Buddhist Sangha, and two thousand Brahman and Jain pandits and eighteen vassal kings attended the gorgeous assembly. According to the pilgrim's account, for eighteen days the debates went on in which he emerged triumphant. But another tradition avers that the great assembly had an unfortunate end. Discomfited in their efforts to refute Hieung-Tsang in honourable debate, his opponents, runs this legend, resorted to base treachery. They hired men to set the pavilion on fire and attempted to assassinate the Emperor himself. But the plot failed and several ring leaders of the conspiracy were arrested and executed, while five hundred of the pandits who were implicated in the conspiracy were expelled from the domain.

Harsha's esteem for the lone pilgrim from the East grew greater after the Assembly. He lavished costly gifts on the traveller, but he, like the devout Bikshu he was, declined them all with politeness. All he would accept was an invitation to attend the great *mela*, or national festival held at Prayag, every five years, which continues even to the present day.

The Great Assembly

"The vast sandy plain to the west of the sacred confluence of the Ganges and Jumna had been known from time immemorial as the Place of Alms; for, charity bestowed upon the spot had for the giver many thousand times the merit of a similar act elsewhere. In this hallowed place it had been Harsha's custom every five years to distribute all the surplus of his treasury. The ceremony to which Hieun-Tsang was invited was the sixth of its kind.

"A great square space was marked off by stakes joined with festoons of roses as in a Vedic sacrifice and in the centre under a number of thatched sheds was piled a vast quantity of treasure, gold and silver work and jewellery wrought by the royal craftsmen. Surrounding these were long sheds filled with all kinds of costly fabrics, brocades, silks in five columns besides heaps of gold and silver coins. Outside this quadrangle were a hundred pavilions ranged in long lines for the distribution of food, each pavilion seating a thousand. An imperial decree invited to the feast religious devotees of all sects and all the poor and the needy in the five Indies."

Supreme Renunciation

The Chinese pilgrim estimated the vast concourse to be at least half a-million. The images of the Buddha, then of Vishnu and then of Shiva were worshipped for the first three days and the precious things of the Imperial treasury were formally dedicated to them.

Then began the distribution of the bounties. Ten thousand Buddhist monks were fed, and each was presented with 100 gold pieces, a pearl, a cotton garment and flowers. Next came the Brahmans, and then the Jain pandits who were

similarly fed and rewarded for forty days. Nor were feedings and the gifts restricted to only the learned among all the sects. A whole month was set apart for the feeding of the poor and the orphans of the lay public who were also loaded with presents.

In this way the surpluses of the five years were exhausted. Only the horses and the elephants, the Imperial Army and its stores remained. And as they were essential for maintenance of the peace of the realm, they were left untouched.

But the Emperor still had his royal robes and costly jewels on his person. And inspired with the supreme renunciation of the Sakya Prince, Harsha began to divest himself of the last of the royal regalia and presented them to the monks assembled. And begging from his sister, the Princess, a common worn-out garment of an ascetic, he put it on and "worshipped the Buddhas of the ten regions, rejoicing that his riches were no longer hidden in a solid and impenetrable storehouse but scattered broadcast on the field of divine merit." Then the other vassal kings purchased the Imperial robes and ornaments from the men to whom they were bestowed and offered them to the Emperor as the tribute due to him.

Parliament of Religions

Harsha pressed Hieung-Tsang to remain in India, but the learned Master of the Law would not be swerved from his great purpose of spreading the Law of the Enlightened in his native country. And with great regrets Harsha took leave of the pilgrim. He accompanied him with his whole retinue for part of the way and equipped him with a strong military escort and all the necessary things for a long journey. Hieung-Tsang returned to China in 645 and lived for nineteen more years translating many a sacred Sanskrit text of Buddhism into Chinese.

And out of the records he has left of his impressions of Harsha, Professor Havell draws pointed attention to one great historical fact. The General Assembly of the Sangha was not, he says, Buddhist in the sectarian sense of modern

writers, but a Parliament of Religions, representative of all important schools of thought, Buddhist, Jain and Brahminical. Thus has it been India's privilege to hold the first Parliament of Religions, hundreds of years before America and Chicago were ever known to the world.

Another striking characteristic of Indian political life, says the same authority, is the extraordinary deference shown by military rulers to the authorised exponents of national culture, the professional pandits.

Height of Civilization

"In mediaeval times," says the professor, "we have known many dignitaries of the Church competing on a battle-field for the control of the temporal arm and exercising the highest authority by virtue of the spiritual terrors they could invoke; but *there is no parallel in European history to the influence exercised by Indian philosophers in every grade of society, from the highest to the lowest, solely by reason of their superior intellectual qualities and personal virtues.*

"The acknowledged champion in a philosophical debate received both before and after death, public honours as great as the warrior could win by a victorious campaign. There could be no better proof that the ethics of the State in ancient India were not entirely dictated by the sword, and that 'humanities' had at least as high a place in national life as they hold in the civilization of modern Europe. Neither in this matter is it necessary to enquire whether the extravagant respect accorded to men of learning tended to weaken the military strength of the State, or whether the exaltation of the scholar above the man of action, confined economic progress to a very narrow grove.

"No civilization in the world's history can be said to have achieved perfection, but the fact remains that judged by standards of culture, Indian civilisation in the seventh century A. D. attained a height which has not yet been exceeded by any other in ancient or modern times."

E. R. GOVINDAN.

Kesari Printing Works, Madras